SŪRAH 53

Al-Najm

(The Star)

Prologue

As a whole, this *sūrah* comes across as a superb symphony. From start to finish, a fine tune runs through its verbal structure, as well as its rhyming verse endings. This is especially apparent and deliberate at certain points, where a word is added or preferred to maintain the beat or the rhyme, in addition to how it enhances the meaning. One example is found in the two verses saying: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Had the second verse said, 'and Manāt, the third', the metre would have been broken and the beat would not have been maintained. On the other hand, had it said, 'and Manāt, the other one,' the rhyme would not have been maintained. Each of the words used contributes to the meaning, but maintaining the metre and the rhyme is also deliberate. The same may be said where the word then is used in the verses: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This word *idhan*, or then, is necessary to maintain the metre and the beat, but it also serves an artistic purpose.[1]

1. Needless to say, we are speaking here of the original Arabic text. The translation cannot maintain any metre or rhyme. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the *sūrah*, apart from the last six verses when it varies. – Editor's note.

The beat in this *sūrah* is of a special musical type in which we note an easy variation and flow, particularly in the first and the last sections. Such variation and flow are in harmony with the images, lively shades and connotations we note in the opening section, as also with the meanings and superb touches in the closing section.

The opening provides images from the world on high where the events to which the *sūrah* refers take place. Further connotations are added by reference to the free movement of the trustworthy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, as he appeared before the Prophet. All these images, scenes, connotations, movements and spiritual atmosphere interact with the tune and the beat in perfect harmony, mutually strengthening their effects. This imparts a special atmosphere to the whole *sūrah*, leaving a marked effect on its succeeding sections, until it concludes on a profoundly powerful note, one that is felt by every part of our souls and every cell in our bodies.

The theme the *sūrah* tackles is the one that pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah: faith and its major concepts consisting of revelation, God's oneness and the hereafter. The *sūrah* tackles this from a particular angle emphasizing the truth of revelation and the solid foundation of faith as compared with the fallacy of idolatry, which lacks foundation.

The first section illustrates the truth and nature of revelation. It describes two scenes that confirm its actual process. This documents the fact that the Prophet received revelation from Gabriel, the angel, whom he saw, as also from the greatest signs of his Lord.

In the second section, the *sūrah* speaks of the unbelievers' alleged deities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt. It also discusses their superstitions about the angels being God's daughters. It states that the unbelievers rely on nothing but conjecture, which is devoid of truth. By contrast, the Prophet calls on them to believe in his message, which is certain to be true, with solid evidence.

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet in its third section that he should ignore those who turn away from God's message, those who preoccupy themselves with this present world, knowing nothing beyond it. It also refers to the hereafter and what it provides of requital for people's actions. It mentions that God knows all beings, ever since He originated them from the earth and when they were still in their mothers' wombs. Indeed,

He knows them better than they know their own selves. Their requital will be based on this certain knowledge; it defines their destiny.

The fourth and final section speaks about the main themes of faith, which have remained the same since the earliest of the divine messages: namely, individual responsibility, accurate reckoning, just reward, and the return of all creatures to their Lord who determines what happens to them as He wills. Added to this is a quick reference to the fate suffered by earlier communities that denied the divine message. The *sūrah* then concludes with a strong beat commanding all mankind to prostrate themselves before God and worship Him alone. Thus, the opening and the end provide a harmony of images, connotations, effects and musical tones.

Al-Najm (The Star)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the star as it sets. (1)

وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ ﴿١﴾

This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. (2)

مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ ﴿٢﴾

He does not speak out of his own fancy. (3)

وَمَا يَنطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ﴿٣﴾

That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, (4)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ﴿٤﴾

something that a very mighty one has taught him, (5)

عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ﴿٥﴾

[an angel] of surpassing power, who stood (6)

ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ ﴿٦﴾

on the highest horizon, (7)

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ ﴿٧﴾

and then drew near, and came close, (8)

ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ ﴿٨﴾

until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, (9)

فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ ﴿٩﴾

and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. (10)

فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ ﴿١٠﴾

[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. (11)

مَا كَذَبَ ٱلْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰ ﴿١١﴾

Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? (12)

أَفَتُمَٰرُونَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, he saw him a second time (13)

وَلَقَدْ رَءَاهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾

by the lote tree of the farthest limit, (14)

عِندَ سِدْرَةِ ٱلْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾

near to the garden of abode, (15)

عِندَهَا جَنَّةُ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. (16)

إِذْ يَغْشَى ٱلسِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; (17)

مَا زَاغَ ٱلْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (18)

لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِ ٱلْكُبْرَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

Have you considered al-Lât and al-'Uzzã, (19)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱللَّٰتَ وَٱلْعُزَّىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

and Manãt, the third other? (20)

وَمَنَوٰةَ ٱلثَّالِثَةَ ٱلْأُخْرَىٰٓ ﴿٢٠﴾

Are you to have the male and He the female? (21)

أَلَكُمُ ٱلذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

That would then be an unfair division. (22)

تِلْكَ إِذًا قِسْمَةٌ ضِيزَىٰٓ ﴿٢٢﴾

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّآ أَسْمَآءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمْ
وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلْطَٰنٍ ۚ
إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى
ٱلْأَنفُسُ ۖ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مِّن رَّبِّهِمُ
ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ﴿٢٣﴾

These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. (23)

أَمْ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ مَا تَمَنَّىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

Is man to have all that he may wish for, (24)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْءَاخِرَةُ وَٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢٥﴾

when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? (25)

وَكَم مِّن مَّلَكٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ لَا تُغْنِى
شَفَٰعَتُهُمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَن يَأْذَنَ
ٱللَّهُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرْضَىٰٓ ﴿٢٦﴾

Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. (26)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَيُسَمُّونَ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ تَسْمِيَةَ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢٧﴾

Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. (27)

وَمَا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ ۖ
وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٢٨﴾

Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (28)

فَأَعْرِضْ عَن مَّن تَوَلَّىٰ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ
إِلَّا ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ﴿٢٩﴾

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. (29)

ذَٰلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ
أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنِ ٱهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٣٠﴾

Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. (30)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
لِيَجْزِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسَٰٓـُٔوا۟ بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَيَجْزِىَ
ٱلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا۟ بِٱلْحُسْنَى ﴿٣١﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. (31)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
إِلَّا ٱللَّمَمَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَٰسِعُ ٱلْمَغْفِرَةِ ۚ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنتُمْ
أَجِنَّةٌ فِى بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تُزَكُّوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ ۖ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰٓ ﴿٣٢﴾

As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing. (32)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾

Consider the one who turns away: (33)

وَأَعْطَىٰ قَلِيلًا وَأَكْدَىٰٓ ﴿٣٤﴾

he gives little at first then hardens and stops. (34)

أَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ فَهُوَ يَرَىٰٓ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? (35)

Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, (36)

أَمْ لَمْ يُنَبَّأْ بِمَا فِي صُحُفِ مُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

and to Abraham who was true to his trust: (37)

وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ الَّذِي وَفَّىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

that no soul shall bear the burden of another; (38)

أَلَّا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

that man will only have what he strives for; (39)

وَأَن لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

that his labour will be seen (40)

وَأَنَّ سَعْيَهُ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

and he will be given the fullest reward for it; (41)

ثُمَّ يُجْزَاهُ الْجَزَاءَ الْأَوْفَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

that with your Lord is the ultimate end; (42)

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٢﴾

that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; (43)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَضْحَكَ وَأَبْكَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is He who deals death and gives life; (44)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَمَاتَ وَأَحْيَا ﴿٤٤﴾

that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, (45)

وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

from a seed as it is lodged in place; (46)

مِن نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

that it is He who brings about a second life; (47)

وَأَنَّ عَلَيْهِ النَّشْأَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ ﴿٤٧﴾

that it is He who gives riches and possessions; (48)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَغْنَىٰ وَأَقْنَىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾

that He is the Lord of Sirius; (49)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلشِّعْرَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

that it is He who destroyed the ancient ʿĀd; (50)

وَأَنَّهُۥٓ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; (51)

وَثَمُودَا۟ فَمَآ أَبْقَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; (52)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْغَىٰ ﴿٥٢﴾

that it is He who brought down the ruined cities (53)

وَٱلْمُؤْتَفِكَةَ أَهْوَىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾

enveloping them with whatever came over them. (54)

فَغَشَّىٰهَا مَا غَشَّىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (55)

فَبِأَىِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾

This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. (56)

هَٰذَا نَذِيرٌ مِّنَ ٱلنُّذُرِ ٱلْأُولَىٰٓ ﴿٥٦﴾

The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. (57)

أَزِفَتِ ٱلْآزِفَةُ ﴿٥٧﴾

None but God can remove it. (58)

لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

Do you find this discourse strange? (59)	أَفَمِنْ هَٰذَا الْحَدِيثِ تَعْجَبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾
Do you laugh instead of weeping, (60)	وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَبْكُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾
and pay no heed? (61)	وَأَنتُمْ سَامِدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾
Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone. (62)	فَاسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ وَاعْبُدُوا ﴿٦٢﴾

As the Prophet Receives Revelation

> *By the star when it sets. This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, something that a very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 1–18)

As we recite this opening, we live for a few moments on the sublime expanse experienced by the Prophet's heart. We rise over wings of light to join the company on high. We listen to the smooth beat echoed in the words, their meanings and the message they impart. We live with the Prophet's heart as it looks on, with all curtains and covers removed. He receives revelation from on high, listens and looks, and he commits to memory what was revealed to him. These moments were a special experience given only to his purified heart, but God favours His servants

by giving them an inspiring description that imparts to them a feeling of the message, its echoes and meanings. He describes to them the journey that took his blessed heart to the heavens above, step by step, scene by scene and stage after stage, as if they too are witnessing it all.

This inspiring description starts with an oath made by God: "*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) The brilliant shining of stars before they set on the horizon is similar to the image drawn of Gabriel, the object of the oath. He is first "*on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed.*" (Verses 7–10) Thus starts the harmony between the scene, the movement, the connotations and the rhythm.

"*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) Reports differ as to the star referred to in this oath. The closest that comes to mind is that of Sirius, which was worshipped by some people in the past. It is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, as it says of God: "*He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) People in olden times paid special attention to this star. Ancient Egyptians used to link the flooding of the Nile to Sirius as it crossed the highest orbit. They watched it carefully to monitor the level of water in the Nile. It also has a special position in Persian and Arabian legends. It is probable, therefore, that the oath by the star at the beginning of the *sūrah* refers to it. That the image chosen here is that of the star's falling and setting is significant, as it suggests that no matter how great a star is in size and position, it falls down and changes place. It does not, then, deserve to be worshipped. What is worshipped should always be high and permanent.

The main object of the oath is the Prophet and the revelation given to him:

> *This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him.* (Verses 2–4)

This friend of yours is on the right course, well guided, sincere, gives you good advice, delivering the truth, free of error, illusions, fabrications and fancy. It is all a revelation bestowed on him from on high, and he delivers what is revealed to him in all honesty. The one who brings

him this revelation is well known, following a well-charted course. The Prophet saw him with his own eyes and mind:

> *A very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?* (Verses 5–12)

This mighty angel of surpassing power is Gabriel. It is he who has taught your friend, Muḥammad. His journey is detailed here. It began on the highest horizon where the Prophet saw him at the start of revelation. He saw Gabriel as God created him, covering the horizon with his enormous body. He then drew near and came closer towards the Prophet until he was very near to him, or, as the *sūrah* says, '*two bow-lengths away, or even closer*', which indicates very close proximity. He then revealed to him whatever he revealed, leaving the subject matter vague to indicate that it is momentous.

Thus, it is a case of seeing someone very close up after he had initially appeared at a distance, and then there is revelation, teaching, looking closely and being certain. In such conditions there can be no lie in what is reported. This truth does not allow for argument or dispute: "*[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?*" (Verses 11–12) A heart's vision is more certain because it precludes any deception that might cloud a person's eyesight. He saw and made sure. His heart was then certain that he saw the angel bearing divine revelations. The angel is a messenger God sends to teach the Prophet and assign to him the task of delivering to mankind what he has learnt. There can be no more dispute or argument.

This was not the only time the Prophet saw the Angel Gabriel in his original form. The *sūrah* itself identifies there was another time:

> *Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 13–18)

This was, according to weightier reports, when the Prophet went on his night journey and ascended to heaven. Gabriel came close to the Prophet in the shape and form God gave him, and this was '*by the lote tree of the farthest limit.*' The farthest limit may mean the point where everything ends, as it is close to the garden of abode. It may also mean the point at which the Prophet's journey taking him to heaven ended. Alternatively, it could mean where Gabriel's company ended, as he stood there when the Prophet ascended a further step taking him closer to his Lord's Throne. All this is known only to God, and He gave this knowledge to His chosen Messenger. This is the only information we have of it, and it is beyond our power to fathom. No human being can understand this except by God's will, the Creator of man and angel, who knows the capabilities of each.

The *sūrah* mentions what affected the scene at the lote tree of the farthest end to further emphasize that it was all real: "*when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it.*" (Verse 16) We are given no details because the matter is too serious to think about anything further. All this was absolutely certain: "*The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold.*" (Verse 17) Nothing affected his eyesight so as to blur his vision. It was indeed a clear, well-defined vision that admitted no doubt. He saw on that trip some of the greatest signs of his Lord, looking directly at these essential truths as they appeared before him free of any make up.

Hence, the question of revelation is one based on clear vision, a well-defined scene, absolute certainty, direct contact, accurate knowledge, real company and an actual journey with its details outlined. It is on the basis of such certainty that your friend's mission is based, even though you continue to reject what he says, casting doubt about his claims. Yet you have known this friend for a very long time, testing his truthfulness and confirming it. His Lord confirms what he says and swears to its truth. He reports to you how he was given revelation and in what circumstances this was imparted. He tells you the circumstances when the revelation is given to him, and by whom: how he saw him and where.

Claiming Divinity for Idols

Such is the irrefutable truth in which Muḥammad (peace be upon him) called them to believe. What basis, then, do they have for their worship and superstitions of alleged deities? How can they justify their worship of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt? How can they prove their dubious claims that these were angels, and that the angels were God's daughters, or that they can intercede with God on people's behalf? Do they have anything to support these claims?

> *Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. Is man to have all that he may wish for, when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.* (Verses 19–28)

Al-Lāt was a carved white rock, enclosed within a building covered with curtains, and with attendants serving it. Surrounding the building was a courtyard that the tribe of Thaqīf living in Ṭā'if, as well as tribes in the surrounding area, venerated. They were considered exceptionally honoured among Arab tribes, not however surpassing the Quraysh, for having it in their hometown. Needless to say, the Quraysh had the greater honour of having the Ka'bah, built by Abraham, in their city. It is thought that the name al-Lāt was considered as being the feminine form of God's Arabic name, Allah.

Al-'Uzzā was a tree around which a building was built and with curtains raised. It was at Nakhlah, between Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Quraysh in particular used to venerate al-'Uzzā. After the Battle of

Uḥud, the Quraysh leader stood boasting, 'We have al-'Uzzā, but you have no 'Uzzā', but the Prophet instructed his Companions to reply by saying: "God is our protecting Master, but you have no master to protect you." It is thought that the name al-'Uzzā was the feminine form of God's name, *al-'Azīz*, meaning the Almighty.

Manāt was stationed at a place called al-Mushallal in Qadīd, between Makkah and Madīnah. The tribes of Khuzā'ah, al-Aws and al-Khazraj used to venerate it in their pre-Islamic days, and used to start their pilgrimage from there.

There were many other idols venerated by different tribes, but these three were the major ones. It is thought that these idols were symbols representing angels whom the Arabs considered to be female and who they also claimed to be God's daughters. Hence, why they were originally worshipped. What happens in such cases is that the original idea is lost and the symbol becomes, for the majority of people, the thing to be worshipped. Only a handful of knowledgeable people continue to remember the original legend.

God mentions these three worshipped objects, implying in the very question He asks that to worship such things is indeed singular: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Such singularity is clearly highlighted in His starting the question with, '*have you considered*', and in describing Manāt as '*the third other*'. After this initial question, He then adds that their other claim that He had daughters while they had sons was even more singular: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This suggests that these worshipped objects related to the legend that the angels were females, begotten by God – far more exalted is God above all such false claims. This confirms what we have said about those Arabs: they hated that they should beget females, but were not ashamed to make the angels, about whom they knew nothing, females and to allege that they were God's offspring. God questions them here on the basis of their own concepts, ridiculing these and whoever upholds them: "*Are you to have the male and He the female?*" Such a division you make between yourselves and God is most unfair!

The whole thing is based on illusion. It has no basis in human knowledge or in reality. No evidence or argument can be given in

support of such claims: "*These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) These names, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, Manāt, and all others like them, which are called deities, angels, female and God's daughters, are false and cannot be substantiated. God has given you no evidence in support of such claims. What God does not sanction is certainly false and insupportable. It carries no weight.

This address to the unbelievers ends in the middle of the verse. The *sūrah* turns away from them as if they were not even there. Indeed, it speaks of them in the third person: "*They follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls.*" (Verse 23) They lack argument, fact and certainty. They base their beliefs on surmise, and turn to their whims for evidence. Faith, however, cannot be based on either surmise or whim. True faith must be based on certainty and irrefutable evidence, without reference to whim or desire. The unbelievers had no excuse to justify their following whim and surmise: "*Even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) When the deciding factor is one's own whim and desire, nothing can be right, and no guidance is of any use. The problem is not the absence of truth or evidence supporting it; the problem is a powerful desire that wants certain things, seeking justification for what it wants. This is the worst situation man can find himself in, because then no guidance is of any benefit and no proof is convincing.

Hence the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Is man to have all that he may wish for?*" (Verse 24) Will everything man wishes come true, have reality? Things are not like that. Truth and reality are different from wishful thinking, which cannot change facts. The fact is that man errs when he follows his own desires. He is too weak to change the nature of things. Everything in this life and the next belongs to God who accomplishes whatever He wills in both worlds: "*Both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone.*" (Verse 25)

We note here that the life to come is mentioned first, ahead of the present life, in order to maintain the rhyme. However, this gives an intended connotation, signifying that the life to come is more

important. This is normal in the Qur'ān, where the meaning fits well with the beat and the rhyme, allowing neither aspect to overshadow the other. This applies to everything of God's making throughout the universe, where beauty is maintained in harmony with the fulfilment of the function.

Since everything belongs to God in both this world and the life to come, there can be no basis for the unbelievers' conjectures that their false deities can intercede with God on their behalf. They used to say: "*We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.*" (39: 3) Such conjecture is baseless. None of the angels in heaven can intercede with God except when God grants them permission to do so: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26)

Having been proved in the previous verses to be false, their claims now fall apart. All fallacy and doubt is now removed from faith. Everything in this world and the following one belongs to God. Whims and desires cannot change reality. Intercession can only be accepted by God's leave. The final judgement is His alone.

At the end of this section, a final discussion is given of the unbelievers' false concepts about the angels, showing them to be baseless: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) This final comment implicitly refers to the link between al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt and the legend that makes angels female and that further alleges that they belong to God. This whole legend lacks all foundation. The unbelievers had no means whatsoever to learn anything true about the nature of the angels. As for the angels being God's offspring, this is a fallacy, ingrained in their false surmise, which can never be a substitute for the truth.

The Attitude to Take

At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet. It directs him to ignore such people and turn away from them, leaving their fate to God. He knows the ones who do well and those who do badly, and it is He who

requites both those who follow His guidance and those who remain in error. He is the One who controls the universe, this life and the life to come. He is the One who deals in absolute justice, wronging no one, forgiving sins that are not persisted with. He knows everyone's intentions and inner thoughts, as He is the Creator of mankind who knows everyone's reality at every stage and at every moment:

> *So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.* (Verses 29–32)

This order to ignore those who turn away from God's message and remain preoccupied with this present life is directed in the first place to the Prophet. He should not concern himself with those unbelievers whose legends and attitudes have already been discussed in the *sūrah*. It is also directed at every Muslim who must adopt a similar attitude towards anyone who refuses to believe in God, focuses all his attention on this life, disbelieves in the life to come, considers the life of this world to be the ultimate goal and adopts a way of life based on this concept. Such people sever any relation between their consciences and belief in God, for it is He who holds them to account for their deeds after the end of their time on earth. Those who are nearest to this description in our time are those who advocate materialistic creeds.

Someone who believes in God and in the life to come cannot afford to give much thought to, let alone interact with, anyone who turns away from God's message and who discards the life to come altogether. Their ways of life are so different that they cannot meet over a single point. All their standards, values and goals in life are in disagreement.

Therefore, the two cannot cooperate or collaborate in any activity. With such being the case, why should a believer concern himself with the one who turns away from God and His message? To do so is to waste effort and energy.

Moreover, to ignore them is to put them low. No matter what sort of people they are, the ones who do not believe in God and have no preoccupation other than this present life cannot see the truth or understand it. They stand behind the walls of this present life. It represents the total sum of their knowledge. It is a scanty little sum even though it may appear substantial; narrow even if it appears vast; leading into error even though it seems enlightened. A person whose feelings, heart and mind are confined to this earth, despite the fact that we see with our eyes a huge world beyond, cannot know anything of value. This huge world we see has not created itself, and the possibility of its just coming into existence must automatically be rejected by human logic. Since it has a Creator, it could not have existed as a pastime. To say that this present life is the be all and end all of this huge universe is to indulge in triviality. When we understand the true nature of this universe, whatever angle we look at it from, we will inevitably believe in the Creator, and also in the life to come. The supreme Creator who originated this huge universe does not engage in trivialities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we should ignore those who turn away from God's message and limit themselves to the confines of this present life. For one thing, ignoring them will ensure that we care only for those who deserve to be cared for. Moreover, it puts in the right place those whose knowledge does not go beyond the present life. We are commanded to do so, and God's command must be obeyed.

"*Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance.*" (Verse 30) He knew that those people were in error. Therefore, He did not wish for his Messenger and those who follow His guidance to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of those in error, nor to befriend and associate with them. They must not be deceived by appearances that show their scanty and erroneous knowledge as great, for all such knowledge is confined to this world and prevents man from appreciating the truth that leads to believing in God and the life to come.

Errant and deviant people may acquire knowledge that appears to be great in the eyes of the masses. They may think such knowledge to have far-reaching effects in this present life. Yet possessing such knowledge does not alter the fact that they are in error, ignorant and have impaired understanding. The bond between the universe and its Creator and the link between man's action and reward are two aspects of truth that are necessary for anyone with true knowledge. Without these two truths any knowledge remains superficial. It has neither a real effect on human life, nor does it help its progress. The value of knowledge is measured by its effect on the human soul and people's moral relations. Otherwise, such knowledge produces nothing other than progress in machines and retrogression in human values. And knowledge that promotes machines at the expense of humans is miserable indeed.

A man who feels that his Creator created the universe according to a single, coherent law will inevitably find his attitude to life and all he sees around him influenced by this. He, thus, realizes that his existence has a higher objective than his own immediate life, because it is interlinked with the existence of the universe. He begins to look at himself in a different light. He will see himself as bigger than his own self with his limited lifespan. He will see himself as greater than his family with its few individuals, then of his community, country and class. He is at a higher level than all these formations.

To realize that he must submit an account to his Creator on the Day of Judgement when God will requite him for his deeds is bound to alter man's concepts, methods of evaluation, motives and goals. It will also provide a clear link between his moral sense and his destiny, for he will recognize that his salvation is dependent on how his moral values influence his actions. This is bound to strengthen and enhance his moral sense, making him stronger and better able to control his actions. He has now a watchful inner guard, keeping an eye on the final reckoning in the hereafter. Besides, he is reassured that goodness will eventually triumph, even if it appears to lose some rounds in the battle that takes place on earth. It is his duty to always support what is good and strive for its triumph, even though he himself may suffer defeat. The final outcome is not in this life on earth; it is there, with the final reckoning, in that most certain life to come.

This question of belief in God and in the Day of Judgement is of immense importance. As a human need, it is more important than food, drink and clothing. With it, man's humanity is assured, but without it, man is just another animal.

When standards, goals and life concepts are so different between believers and unbelievers, there can be no partnership, friendship, interaction or serious dealings. There can be nothing between one who believes in God and another whose preoccupation with this present life makes him turn away from God's message. To say anything different is to indulge in futile argument and to disobey God's clear order: "*Ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world.*" (Verse 29)

What Requital for Man

> *Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.* (Verse 31)

This statement, emphasizing God's full ownership of the heavens and earth, gives the question of the hereafter added strength and greater influence. The One who determines the life to come and its timing is the One to whom the heavens and earth belong. Only He is able to administer reward, and to ensure that it is administered with full justice for all: "*He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then defines the ones who do good, earning a reward according to what is best. They are the ones "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence.*" (Verse 32) Grave sins are cardinal, and shameful deeds are those sins that represent serious transgression. Scholars differ as to the meaning of the Arabic word *lamam*, translated here as casual indulgence.

Ibn Kathīr says that the exception indicated by the phrase, *apart from*, is unrelated, meaning that what follows it does not relate to what comes before it, because to him *lamam* means trivial sin. Imām Aḥmad quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "Nothing defines *lamam* better than the hadith

quoting the Prophet as saying, 'Everyone will inevitably have his share of fornication: the eye fornicates with glances, the tongue with words, and the mind with thoughts and desire; and ultimately one confirms all this going the whole way or discards it.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "The eye fornicates with glances, the lips with kissing, the hands with the use of force and the legs with walking. Ultimately one confirms all this with action going the whole way or not. If one goes the whole way, it is adultery, and if not then it is *lamam*." Similar views are expressed by Masrūq and al-Sha'bī, who were prominent early scholars. Likewise, Abū Hurayrah is quoted as explaining *lamam* as "a kiss, a glance, a gesture and minor action. Should genitals meet, then that is adultery requiring a full bath."

All these views are similar, defining *lamam* as trivial sin. Other scholars, however, express different views. A report by Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd ibn Aslam defines it as, 'what was done in the past'. Mujāhid says that "*lamam* means a person committing a serious sin and then desisting from it". Al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās a report saying that *lamam* means "a man indulges in a grave sin then repents". He refers to a *ḥadīth* quoting the Prophet as saying: "If You forgive me, My Lord, then You will forgive much. Who of Your servants has not dipped into *lamam*." Abū Hurayrah is also reported to have said in reference to this Qur'ānic statement, "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence*". (Verse 32): "This means a one-off indulgence in adultery then repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in stealing before repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in drinking then repentance with no repeat. Such is *lamam*." A similar view is attributed to al-Ḥasan, an early prominent scholar.

On balance, I feel that this second view is more appropriate, as it fits better with the statement that follows in the same verse: "*Your Lord is abounding in forgiveness.*" (Verse 32) Describing God's forgiveness as abounding fits well with the view that *lamam* is a casual indulgence in such grave sins and shameful conduct, followed by sincere and genuine repentance. This means that the definition the *sūrah* gives of those '*who do good*' means that they are the ones who '*avoid grave sins and shameful deeds,*' unless they slip, but repent soon after and refrain from repeating such sins. In another *sūrah*, God speaks of the 'God-fearing',

defining them as "*Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God can forgive sins? – and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done.*" (3: 135) He promises to reward them with forgiveness and admittance into a "*paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*" (3: 133) This is indeed more in line with the concept of God's mercy being ever present and far extending, and of His forgiveness being abounding.

The verse concludes by the statement that God's requital of people's deeds is based on His knowledge of their inner thoughts throughout all stages of their lives: "*He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs.*" (Verse 32) His knowledge, then, precedes their own actions, as it is the knowledge of their true nature which they themselves do not even know. It is known only to God, their Creator. This knowledge was present when God originated them from the earth before they were brought into existence, and when they were still in their mothers' wombs, before they were brought into the light. It is the knowledge of their truth before it takes physical shape, and of their nature before it translates into action.

When we think of God's knowledge in this way, we realize that it is pointless, and indeed impudent for a man to tell Him about himself, trying to press his good points: "*Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.*" (Verse 32) He does not need for you to tell Him about yourselves, or to suggest how your deeds measure up. His knowledge is perfect, His measure accurate, His reward just, His judgement final, and to Him all creatures return.

On Their Own

The *sūrah* moves now to its final part which maintains the same rhythm as the first part. It states the basic concept of divine faith, as it has been ever since the time of Abraham, who delivered the first full code for living. It makes their Lord known to mankind. It shows them how His will influences their lives, portraying its effects one after another in a way that strongly shakes the human conscience. It builds its effect up

to the final beats, which are very powerful and are received with softened hearts and responsive minds.

> *Consider the one who turns away: he gives little at first then hardens and stops. Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that man will only have what he strives for; that his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it; that with your Lord is the ultimate end; that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; and it is He who deals death and gives life; that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place; that it is He who brings about a second life; that it is He who gives riches and possessions; that He is the Lord of Sirius; that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*
>
> *This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it. Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed? Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.* (Verses 33–62)

This passage begins with a reference to the one who turns away, giving little at first before stopping altogether. His attitude is strange and the *sūrah* wonders at him. Some reports suggest that these two short verses refer to a particular man who began by making a small donation for God's cause before stopping for fear of becoming poor. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī names this person as 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, reporting a story which has no solid basis and will be dismissed as totally unreliable by anyone who knows even a little about 'Uthmān and his history of very generous donations for Islam and the Muslim community. Such donations never stopped

at any time during his life. He was a most devoted servant of Islam, with a strong and sound faith, and with good knowledge of the Islamic principles, particularly with regard to individual responsibility.[2]

It may be that this Qur'ānic statement refers to a particular case, but it is equally possible that it is speaking about a type, rather than an individual. Anyone who abandons this line, weakening after having come forward with effort and money in support of God's cause, invites amazement. The Qur'ān uses this example to present and clarify certain basic principles of the Islamic faith.

"*Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see?*" (Verse 35) Knowledge of what lies beyond our perception belongs to God and can only be seen by Him. No man can fathom it. No one can be sure what turn events will take and what effect such a turn will have on him. Therefore, one must work tirelessly, doing one's best throughout one's life. It is wrong to stop doing what is good, because nothing guarantees a good turn in the future life better than good action now, in this present life, coupled with a hope to earn God's forgiveness and pleasure.

"*Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust.*" (Verses 36–37) This religion goes far back in history, and its latest version is closely related to its oldest one, with both having the same fundamental principles and values. Its different parts are mutually complementary, despite the fact that there have been many messages and messengers, with wide gulfs separating them in time and place. It is embodied in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham before him. Abraham is singled out here as having been true to his trust. He fulfilled every assignment given to him. This quality of Abraham's is highlighted here to provide contrast with that of doing a little good first, then stopping altogether.

2. The story mentions that 'Uthmān used to donate for good causes. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, his brother through breast-feeding, i.e. one woman breast-fed them both when they were young, said to him: "If you continue at this rate, you will soon be without money." 'Uthmān said: "I committed sins, and I hope that what I am doing will earn me forgiveness by God." 'Abdullāh said: "Give me your she-camel, with its present load, and I will bear all your sins." He gave him that and called witnesses to solemnize the deal. He then stopped his donations. Therefore, these verses were revealed. This is the story, and it is clearly false. 'Uthmān could never have behaved in this way.

What do their revelations contain? The answer is clearly stated: "*That no soul shall bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 38) No one shall bear another's burden, making it heavier or lighter. Voluntary help is not acceptable in this respect.

"*That man will only have what he strives for.*" (Verse 39) Such is the rule. No one is to be credited with anything other than his own deeds. No man or woman will be given anything extra that someone else might have done; nor will anything be taken away so as to be credited to someone else. This present life is the chance given to all to work as they please. Once a person dies, the chance has gone. No further action can be credited, except as explained by the Prophet: "When a human being dies, his deeds come to a final end except in one of three ways: a continuing act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge, and a dutiful child who prays for him." [Related by Muslim.] These three ways are, in essence, part of a person's own deeds:

> On this Qur'ānic verse, al-Shāfi'ī and other scholars base their view that reading the Qur'ān and requesting God to credit the reward for its recitation to the dead is not valid. They say that the reward for such a recitation will not be credited to a deceased person, because it is not his own deed. Therefore, the Prophet did not recommend it in any explicit or implicit way. Nor was this practised by any of the Prophet's Companions. Had it been valid, they would have done it before us. When we speak about virtuous actions earning reward, we must confine ourselves to what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth*. We cannot rely on analogy or scholarly views. As for praying for the deceased and donating to charity on their behalf, these are unanimously agreed upon by scholars to be credited to them since they are expressly stated in authentic religious texts.[3]

"*That his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it.*" (Verses 40–41) Nothing of a person's deeds will ever be lost, as nothing will be overlooked by Him. Every action, no matter how small,

3. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 276.

will be valued by God's fine and accurate measure so as to give everyone their full reward. No one will suffer even the slightest loss or injustice.

Thus, the principle of individual responsibility goes hand in hand with that of absolute justice for all. Man is thus given his full humanity based on his being a rational and responsible creature who can be trusted to look after himself. He is in a position of honour, given a chance to work for his future life and then submits his work for reckoning and reward. He is reassured that absolute justice will be done, as the reckoning is fair, unaffected by preferential treatment or oversight.

"*That with your Lord is the ultimate end.*" (Verse 42) The only road to follow is the one leading to Him. There is no refuge other than with Him, and no abode other than what He defines, in a place of bliss or one of suffering. This truth is extremely significant in shaping man's feelings and ideas. When man realizes that everything and everyone will ultimately end with God, he knows the inevitable outcome right from the beginning, and will try to determine his own actions in accordance with this truth. His heart and mind will remain, throughout his life journey, focused on the end he knows to be inevitable.

Life's Journey

Having given us a glimpse of the ultimate end, the *sūrah* takes us back to this life, showing us some aspects of the work of the divine will at every stage and in every situation: "*That it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep.*" (Verse 43) These few words embody a number of facts and generate many inspiring images. It is God who gave man the two inner qualities of laughter and weeping. No one knows quite how they work in man's complex constitution, in which the psychology is as complex as the anatomy. Indeed, we realize that both psychological and physical factors closely interact to produce laughter or weeping.

It is God who causes man to laugh or weep, by creating what makes man laugh or weep. He makes man laugh in certain situations and weep in others according to the interplay of certain secret elements within him. Man may laugh tomorrow at what causes him to weep today, or may weep now because of something that made him laugh a short time

earlier. Yet this is due to no madness or absent-mindedness. It is merely the result of changing psychological conditions as influenced by a host of factors that affect our feelings and reactions.

God also makes different people laugh or weep at the same time, each according to different influences. Some may laugh at the very thing that makes others weep. Although the situation is the same, its circumstances and outcome give it widely different effects on people. Moreover, God causes the same person to laugh and weep at the same thing. He may react to something with laughter until its outcome becomes known to him when he cries. Then he wishes that he had not laughed or reacted in the way he had. Many are those who laugh in this present life only to find themselves weeping in the life to come when regret is of no use.

All these images, connotations, feelings and situations spring to mind as we read this short verse. More are generated as we gain further experience in life, and as causes of laughter and weeping come into play. This is one more aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.

"*And it is He who deals death and gives life.*" (Verse 44) Likewise, this short verse gives rise to endless images. It is God who initiates life and death. In another *sūrah*, we read that God "*has created death and life.*" (67: 2) Both are well known to man as they always occur, but both are deeply hidden when man tries to fathom their nature. What is death; what is life? What answers do we get when we try to understand them further than the two words and the two apparent conditions imply? How does life start in a living thing? Where does it come from; and how does it go into something to make it alive? How does it progress, taking this living thing with it on its way? What is death; how does it happen before the start of life, and after its departure from living things? It is all a deep secret hidden beyond thick curtains that God's hand has drawn.

It is God who deals death and gives life. As we listen, there appear before us millions of images of life and death, in all living worlds, all at the same moment. Consider how many millions upon millions of living things have died at this moment in time! Consider also how many millions upon millions have started their life's journeys, with life springing into them from where neither they nor anyone else, apart from God, knows! How many deaths have occurred at this moment, yet they themselves give rise to life? Now let us stretch our minds to

past generations: how many have lived and died across endless centuries before human life started on this planet? We will not say anything about other types of life and death elsewhere in the universe. No human mind can ever imagine these.

These few words give rise to endless images that shake man to the core. Inevitably, he is profoundly influenced by their rhythm and widely ranging echoes.

A Sperm and Two Sexes

"*That it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place.*" (Verses 45–46) This is a fact of momentous significance, even though man is oblivious to it because he sees it taking place all the time. It is indeed greater than the most amazing thing human imagination can ever produce. A seed is discharged. It is merely one of many types of discharge the human body makes, such as sweat, tears, mucous, etc. Then after a certain period determined by God, this discharge becomes something different. It becomes a human being, either male or female. How does this miracle happen? Had we not seen it happen, it would not have even entered our imaginations or crossed our minds. Where was this human being, with its very sophisticated and complex constitution? Where was it lodged in that little drop of semen, or indeed in one of the millions of its sperms? Look at the bones, flesh, skin, veins, hair, nails, distinctive features, characteristics, potentials and moods of a human being, and think: where was all that hidden in a single microscopic cell floating, like millions similar to it, in a drop of liquid that a man discharges? Where in particular are lodged the characteristics of male and female in that single cell?

What human mind can contemplate this great fact and continue to arrogantly argue that it all just happens in this way, or that it just learnt to move in this line? Indeed, some people try to posit a seemingly enlightened argument, saying that the sperm acts in this way because, like all living things, it has the ability of reproduction. This is a circular argument, one that gives an explanation but needs an explanation itself. Who gave the sperm this potential? Who placed into it the latent desire to preserve its kind through reproduction? Weak and tiny as the sperm

is, who made it able to reproduce its kind? Who charted its journey so as to make it proceed with its task in such a well-defined way as to fulfil its desire of reproduction? Indeed, who gave it all the characteristics of its kind so as to reproduce them all? Moreover, why should it wish to reproduce its kind, and what interest is there for this sperm to reproduce all the characteristics of its kind? Can there be any other answer to all these questions other than a wise will that has a certain design for a certain objective, and that this will is able to fulfil its design and achieve its objective?

Having stated this first initiation of man, which is a continuously repeated event that no one denies, the *sūrah* moves directly to the second: "*That it is He who brings about a second life.*" (Verse 47) This second life belongs to the realm that is beyond our perception, but the first initiation provides ample evidence of its possibility. The One who created the two sexes from a single seed can easily bring life back to bones and other remains. Such bones and dust are no way less than an ejaculated seed as production material. Moreover, the first initiation provides evidence of the wisdom behind a second life. The subtle, yet elaborate planning that leads the tiny living cell along its arduous way until it becomes a male or a female must have a goal beyond this journey on earth in which nothing is complete and where people do not receive full reward or requital for their good or evil actions. This elaborate planning has made it thus because it includes a second life, which brings everything to its fullness. We see that the first initiation gives double evidence of the second life. Hence, it is mentioned first.

In both lives, God bestows riches on whomever He wills of His servants: "*That it is He who gives riches and possessions.*" (Verse 48) Many and diverse are the types of riches God grants to His servants in this world: wealth, health, offspring, contentedness, happiness, feeling, thought as well as the unique feeling of richness generated by feeling one's bond with God. He also bestows riches of the life to come on whomever He wills. Furthermore, He gives those He chooses possessions in plenty both in this life and the next. Human beings are poor, penniless. They cannot become rich and own things unless God grants them whatever He is pleased to grant them out of His treasures. They all know this and look up to Him for more, realizing that He is

the only source. They know that His treasures are the ones that are full and endless, while everything else is empty.

"*That He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) Sirius is a star that is 20 times heavier than the sun, gives 50 times the light the sun gives, and is a million times further away from us than the sun. Some people used to worship Sirius, and some used to watch it in particular, feeling that it had special importance. Therefore, stating that God is the Lord of Sirius is most fitting in this *sūrah*, which starts with an oath by the star as it sets, and speaks about the journey to the high heavens, focusing in all this on God's oneness and showing the fallacy of associating partners with Him.

The Communities of Old

> *That it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?* (Verses 50–55)

This is a quick round, with a short pause placed where the fate of each of those old communities is mentioned, coupled with a sharp touch with which we are certain to interact. The 'Ād, Thamūd and people of Noah are well known to the reader of the Qur'ān, as they are mentioned several times in this divine book. The ruined cities are those of Lot's people who were immersed in sin and went far astray. Their cities were turned upside down, but their fate is left vague here, '*enveloping them with whatever came over them,*' to add a feeling of suspense through which we see images of ruins upon ruins, leaving nothing clear or identifiable.

"*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*" (Verse 55) The calamities that befell those communities were blessings then. Did they not lead to the destruction of evil? Were they not events that hurled the truth over falsehood to make it disappear? Did they not leave signs for everyone to reflect upon? These are certainly blessings. Hence why should people still doubt them? The address here is to every heart and

mind which reflect on what God does and which see the blessing even when the event is one of calamity.

The *sūrah* now delivers its final beat, one that is profound and powerful. It is an outcry alerting us to the great, looming danger: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) This Messenger whom you doubt and who you argue about with the warnings he gives you is just like those warnings of old. When they were taken lightly, they were followed with well-known events. The imminent Hour is now close, it will sweep everything before it. It is the one that will envelop and strike all that this Messenger has been warning you about. Alternatively, the warning mentioned in the verse refers to the subject of the warning, or rather the suffering that may be inflicted. Its nature and timing are known only to God. When it takes place none but God can lift it: "*None but God can remove it.*"

The danger is now very close to you, and the compassionate warner is calling on you to save yourselves, but you are deeply indulged, paying no attention, oblivious of what is about to engulf you: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) This discourse is great and serious, defining heavy responsibilities for people while also providing them with a complete code for living. Why should they find it strange? Why should they laugh when it is given in all seriousness? The responsibilities it outlines and the fact that people will have to give full accounts of what they do in life put them in a situation that should invite weeping rather than laughter.

Now the *sūrah* ends with a loud command that strikes both their ears and hearts, telling them what they should do to save themselves from the abyss at the edge of which they perilously stand: "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.*" (Verse 62) Coming after such a discourse creating immense influences, this command struck awe in their hearts and they prostrated themselves as commanded. These idolaters, who endlessly argued about the Qur'ān and revelation, and about God and His message, prostrated themselves at this point. All the people listening to the Prophet reciting this *sūrah* felt its strong beat like a blacksmith's hammer. All of them, Muslims and unbelievers alike, saw the Prophet prostrating himself at its end and they did likewise.

They could not resist the power of the Qur'ān or question its authority. When they came to, they were stunned as they realized what they had just done.

There are numerous reports describing this event. While they are all unanimous about its details, they differ in explaining what appears to be a strange happening. In fact, though, it is not strange at all. It is an example of the effect the Qur'ān produces and how hearts interact with it.

A Fabricated Story

To me, this event of unbelievers prostrating themselves before God, alongside the Muslims, needed an explanation. However, an experience I went through clarified for me its true reasons.

I used to read the false reports of what is known as the 'story of the birds' concerning this event. These are given by Ibn Sa'd in his *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his book on history, and by some commentators on the Qur'ān as they speak in detail about the verse that says: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (22: 52) Ibn Kathīr gives the following comment on these reports: "They are all lacking in authenticity. I did not find any of them to have a sound chain of transmission."

The most detailed of these reports and the least in fabrication is the one given by Ibn Abī Ḥātim:

> Prior to the revelation of *Sūrah* 53, The Star, the unbelievers used to say: 'If only this man [meaning the Prophet] would speak in a good way about our deities, we would approve of him and his followers. Unfortunately, he speaks of our deities in a more derogatory way than he speaks of others who differ with him, such as the Jews and the Christians. The Prophet was deeply hurt by what the unbelievers inflicted on him and his Companions, causing them much harm and accusing him of lying. He was saddened by their stubborn rejection of his message, and was eager that they should

follow divine guidance. When God revealed to him *Sūrah* 53, The Star, and he read the verses saying, '*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*' Satan threw some words at the mention of these idols, adding after their names the following couplet: 'These are exalted birds, whose intercession is desirable.' This rhyming couplet was of Satan's doing. Yet it went into the heart of every unbeliever in Makkah and they repeated it to one another, claiming that Muḥammad had reverted to his people's religion. However the Prophet continued to recite the *sūrah* to the end, when he prostrated himself, as did all those present, believers and unbelievers. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was an old man. He took a handful of dust from the earth in his hand and put his forehead on it in a gesture of prostration.

Both parties were amazed at the fact that the unbelievers prostrated themselves when the Prophet did so. The Muslims, who did not hear Satan's words to the unbelievers, wondered how the unbelievers would prostrate themselves when they did not believe. The unbelievers were happy at the words Satan added, making them feel that the Prophet read them, and considered that their prostration was in acknowledgement of the praise given to their deities. This quickly circulated among people and Satan helped to spread it further until it reached Abyssinia where a large number of the early Muslims had migrated. On hearing of what happened, these Muslims in Abyssinia thought that the people of Makkah had all accepted Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also heard that al-Walīd prostrated himself on his own palm. They felt that Makkah was now a safe place for Islam and its followers. Therefore some of them began to return.

God, however, rendered the aspersion cast by Satan as null and void, making His message clear in itself and by itself, and preserving His Messenger from the fabricated lie. He also revealed the verse saying: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes...*" (22: 52) When God confirmed His word, the unbelievers reverted to their practices of determined hostility, increasing their pressure on the believers.

Other reports go even further in fabricating lies, attributing those words about 'exalted birds' to the Prophet himself, justifying this by his desire to come to some arrangement with the Quraysh. Far be it for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to try to appease unbelievers.

Right from the outset, I rejected all these reports. For one thing, they go against the facts of the Prophet's infallibility and the preservation of the Qur'ān by God, keeping it immune from any distortion. The very flow of the *sūrah* makes such an addition absolutely impossible. In its entirety, the *sūrah* shows the fallacy of the idolaters' belief in those deities and the legends they weave around them. How can such a couplet of praise for them be inserted into such refutation? Even if we consider the argument of some who say that the couplet was heard only by the unbelievers, but not by the believers, it still remains unacceptable. Those unbelievers were Arabs who had a fine sense of their own language. How would they have felt had they heard this false couplet, followed by the verses stating: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority.*" (Verses 21–23) Shortly afterwards they would have heard the verses: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) And these are even preceded by the verse: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26) Had those Arabs, endowed as they were with a fine sense of language, heard this sequence after a supposed couplet praising their idols and confirming that they can intercede with God, they would not have prostrated themselves, because the whole context would have been flawed and crooked. Those Arabs were not as stupid as the fabricators of these reports, to which Orientalists tried to give credence, either out of ignorance or to serve a purpose of their own.

The prostration by the unbelievers had, then, a reason other than this fabricated story. Likewise the return of some immigrants from Abyssinia was for a different reason. This is not the occasion to establish the reason for their return. Instead, we will only concentrate here on the question of the unbelievers' prostration.

A Personal Experience

I spent some time trying to discover the reason for this prostration. I even considered the possibility that it did not take place, and that it was rather a report explaining the return of the immigrants from Abyssinia. It was during this time, however, that I had the experience to which I referred earlier and will now recount.

We were a group of friends passing an evening together when we heard a recitation of the Qur'ān nearby. The reciter, who had an inspiring voice and a fine recitation, was reading this *sūrah*, The Star. Conversation between us ceased as we listened to the Qur'ān. Gradually, I began to feel what the reciter was reading deeply in my heart. I lived with him and felt how the Prophet went on this journey to join the community on high. I lived with him as he saw Gabriel in his angelic form God had created. That was a most remarkable event to contemplate. I reflected on his journey to the world beyond, to the tree at the farthest limit, and to the garden of abode in heaven. I lived all this, as far as my imagination could stretch, and my feelings bear. I followed him as the legends weaved by the idolaters about the angels, and how they worshipped them alleging that they were God's daughters, were shattered at the first touch of reality. I reflected on how a human being is brought into being out of the earth and how it becomes an embryo in its mother's womb, and how each of us is watched by God throughout our life's journey.

I felt a shiver as the reciter began the last part of the *sūrah*, referring to the world beyond the reach of our perception and known only to God; the actions recorded in full and accurate detail so that nothing is lost at the time of reckoning; the fact that all journeys end with God; the multitudes that laugh and the multitudes that cry; the dead and the living in countless numbers; the human seed as it finds its way in the dark before it begins to show its secrets revealing whether it is a male or a female; the second creation; the fate of past communities and the ruined cities of Lot's people as they were enveloped with whatever covered them.

I listened attentively to the last warning before the impending calamity: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) I then heard the last cry and felt all my body and soul

trembling: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) When the reciter read the final verse, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" the trembling was no longer only in my heart; it had spread to my whole body and took physical shape, which I could not resist. All my body was quivering and I could neither stop the quivering nor prevent my tears from pouring.

I realized then that the prostration by all those who were listening to the Prophet as he recited this *sūrah* was correct, and that its explanation is easy. Its secret is contained in the powerful effect the Qur'ān has on people and in particular the powerful rhythm this *sūrah* carries. It was not the first time I had read or listened to this *sūrah*, but on that particular occasion it had this effect on me, causing such a response. This is one of the secrets of the Qur'ān: there are special moments, which cannot be anticipated, when a verse or a *sūrah* touches special cords within us to establish direct contact with our hearts. The result is that we are profoundly affected by what we read or listen to.

One such moment touched the hearts of all present as the Prophet recited this *sūrah*, putting all his heart feelings into its recitation, living again all its images which he had already seen with his eyes. All the power in this *sūrah* poured forth from his recitation to touch the hearts of the audience, and they trembled and quivered. When they heard, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" Muḥammad and the Muslims present prostrated themselves. The unbelievers could only follow suit, and so prostrated themselves.

Someone may say to me that I am basing my argument on a personal experience at a certain moment. Furthermore, I am a Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān and feels its special effect, while those others were idolaters, rejecting God's message and denying the Qur'ān. In reply I point out two considerations. The first is that the reciter in their case was Muḥammad, the Prophet, (peace be upon him). He had received the Qur'ān directly from its source and took heart from it, living every moment of his life with it. He loved the Qur'ān so much that when he heard a person reading it in his home, he would walk slowly and listen attentively at the door until the reciter had finished. As this particular *sūrah* was read, he was re-living an experience he had gone through

on high, and with the Holy Spirit as he saw him in his original form. I was listening to a fellow man reciting it, and the difference between the two cases is vast.

The second consideration is that those idolaters were not immune to trembling when they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It was their affected stubbornness that prevented them from acknowledging the truth. The following two cases provide enough evidence of their shaking and trembling when they listened to the Qur'ān.

In his biographical note on 'Utbah ibn Abī Lahab, Ibn 'Asākir reports on the authority of Hannād ibn al-Aswad:

> Both Abū Lahab and his son 'Utbah were preparing to travel to Syria, and I also was preparing to go with them. 'Utbah said: "I will go to Muḥammad and say some harsh words about his God." He went to Muḥammad and said to him that he would never believe in the one who '*drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer.*' The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Set on him one of your dogs.' 'Utbah then left him and returned to his father who asked him what Muḥammad's reaction was and 'Utbah reported the Prophet's prayer. Abū Lahab said: 'Son, I really fear for you the effect of his prayer.' Then we set on our way until we stopped at Abrāh where we went into a monk's hermitage. The monk asked us: 'What makes you stop at this place where lions are as plentiful as cats?' Then Abū Lahab said to us: 'You know that I am your eldest and I have certain rights. You also know that this man prayed against my son and I fear what may happen to him as a result. Therefore, bring all your things into the hermitage and put it in the middle, laying my son's blanket on top of it. Then spread your blankets all around it.' We did as he asked us. During the night, a lion came in and smelled all our faces. When he did not find what he wanted, he pulled himself together and leapt landing on top of our things. He smelled 'Utbah's face before hitting him and breaking his head. Abū Lahab said: 'I knew that Muḥammad's prayer was certain to catch up with him.'

The first case documented above mentions Abū Lahab, one of the Prophet's most vehement opponents who used to set people against

him. He is the one the Qur'ān specifically condemns: "*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he. His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing. He shall have to endure a flaming fire, and his wife, the carrier of firewood, shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.*" (111: 1–5) We see in this report his true feeling about Muḥammad and what he said. We see his profound fear that Muḥammad's prayer against his son would inevitably come true.

The second case refers to 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one the Quraysh chiefs and its representative who tried to negotiate a deal with the Prophet. He suggested that the Prophet should stop his advocacy that led to division among the people and stop criticizing their beliefs. In return they would give him whatever he asked for in money, position and women. When he stated his offer, the Prophet said to him: 'Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you want to say?' When he affirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: 'Then listen to this that I want to read to you.' The Prophet then started to recite from the beginning of *Sūrah* 41: "*A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (41: 1–4) He continued his recitation until he read Verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.'*" At this point, 'Utbah sprang to his feet, put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and was full of terror as he said to the Prophet: "I appeal to you by all ties of kinship not to do so." He then went back to his people, reported on his mission and concluded by saying: "You, the Quraysh people, know that Muḥammad never lies. I feared that a terrible fate might befall you."

Such was the reaction of someone who never accepted Islam. Yet he clearly trembled even though his stubbornness got the better of him, preventing him from acting on what he knew to be true. When people like these listen to this *sūrah*, The Star, being recited by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), then they are very likely to experience a moment of total response which they cannot control. They will submit to the power of the Qur'ān and prostrate themselves with the believers. So let all fabricated stories, like that of the interceding birds, be dumped firmly in the rubbish bin.